

BECOMING A VIRAL CHURCH

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Acts 2: 1-21

Becoming A Viral Church

I remember the first time I had the tiramisu at Malia's restaurant down on Michigan Avenue. It was shortly after they had opened and Emily Joye and I stopped in to grab some dinner one evening in between church meetings.

We were both tired from really full schedules that day and needed a break to relax and get some nourishment before heading into our evening appointments. Neither of us had been to Malia's for dinner before and I don't think either of us had very high expectations. Mediocrity is pretty much the norm for most of the restaurants in town.

We got to Malia's early in the dinner hour so they had a table available for immediate seating. We were both impressed with the variety of the menu and the daily specials that were posted on the chalk board. The service we received was excellent and the quality of our entrées was surprisingly good. But when I put that first spoonful of dessert into my mouth...hmmmm...it was over the top! The rich creaminess of the mascarpone cheese blended with the bittersweet chocolate shavings and the acidity in the dark espresso soaked ladyfingers was balanced by the spicy sweetness of the rum. All of those wonderful ingredients were combined in just the right proportions to create a mouthful of bliss.

People were starting to turn around and stare at us because of the guttural groans that were emanating from our table as we lingered through one mouthful after another. Even though I was already full from such an enjoyable dinner, I didn't want dessert to end. I scraped every last trace of goodness from the dish before finally surrendering my spoon to the waitress.

When I got home from work that evening, I raved about the tiramisu to Patrice. Everyone on our church staff heard

about it the next day when we sat down at the banana table for lunch. For the next week or two, every time I saw a friend that I knew enjoyed good food, I would ask them, "Have you been to Malia's yet? You've got to try their tiramisu!" I even gushed about it in my Awestruck message that week. I don't know how big of a spike they had in their tiramisu sales at Malia's that month, but I personally told about one hundred people about it.

Whenever we experience something that has a powerful and positive emotional impact on us, we want to talk about it. We want to share it with others. We want the people we care about to have the benefit of the same experience that we were privileged to enjoy. Whenever we experience something that has a powerful and positive emotional impact on us, we want to pass it on.

That is why the YouTube video web site has become so popular. When people see something that moves them, they want to share it. When you post a video on YouTube, you can share it with your Facebook friends, or email the link to people in your Outlook address book, or show them the video on your smart phone, or watch it with them on any computer that has internet access or just tell them to look it up on their own when they have a free minute.

The single, most frequently viewed YouTube video of all time is a music video by teen pop star Justin Bieber that captures the universal experience of love and rejection that at some point breaks the heart of every adolescent on this planet. As of 2:00 PM on Friday over 615 million people have watched that 3 minute and 45 second video.

If you look at the top ten most frequently viewed videos on YouTube, you'll see that some of them are silly, some of them are lighthearted, some of them are sensual, and some of them are profound. But all of them have gone viral because of the emotional impact they have had on viewers who have watched them. Each viewer has had an

experience that was so positive and so powerful that they decided to pass it on, and so they forwarded it to some of their friends, and those friends passed it on to some of their friends, who passed it on to their friends, who passed it on to their friends. None of the top ten most frequently watched video clips on YouTube has fewer than 245 million viewers.

When something goes viral, it has the potential to cause a huge impact on the world. Spreading the word about a great dessert or an amusing video clip doesn't make much of a difference, but think about Mohamed Bouazizi's story. He is the 26 year old Tunisian street merchant who set himself on fire in front of his town hall on December 18, 2010 in protest of police corruption and ill treatment by government leaders who cared little about the fate of their poorest and most vulnerable citizens. When his story went viral, it ignited the pent up frustrations of Arab people living under repressive regimes and triggered the Arab Spring that is still transforming the political landscape of the entire Arab Middle East.

On March 7th 1965, a group of about 600 civil rights marchers began walking from Selma, Alabama to the capital building in Montgomery to protest for voting rights reform. They had only gone about six blocks when they came to the Edmund Pettis Bridge and were confronted by Alabama State Troopers mounted on horseback. The police fired tear gas to disburse the crowd and then donned their gas masks and charged into the peaceful assembly brutally beating the marchers back across the bridge with clubs and whips. The events of that Bloody Sunday were caught on television for the whole world to see and so outraged public opinion that the clamor for equal voting rights became irresistible. Just one week later President Johnson announced that he would be sending a comprehensive Voting Rights Bill to Congress for approval.

The church of Jesus Christ first went viral somewhere

around the year 30 AD when a dozen Palestinian Jews experienced the presence of God in their lives in a way that was so powerful and so inspiring that they felt compelled to pass it on. It was shortly after the death and resurrection of Jesus when Jews from all throughout the Middle East had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost.

In a city occupied by foreign soldiers, in an empire maintained by brutal repression, in an economy that kept the majority of citizens landless and impoverished, Jews who gathered in Jerusalem from all corners of the Roman Empire experienced something profound that day. For a brief moment, they had a glimpse of a different way of being in the world. They heard people talking, not about Caesar's mighty power, but about God's deeds of power. And God's power was not delegated to one chosen leader; it was poured out on everyone: young and old, male and female, rich and poor, slave and free. Everyone had a message to share, everyone had a dream to dream, and everyone had a vision to articulate. And even though Jerusalem was filled with people from different tribes, different cultures and different countries, and even though they all spoke different languages, everyone understood what was happening and everyone felt included and everyone knew that God's Spirit was alive in them.

And they came away from that experience so full of hope and so deeply moved that when they returned home they told their friends about this amazing experience they had shared, this oneness that lifted them beyond their differences and drew them together in a new experience of community that left everyone feeling cherished and understood and appreciated and heard. And they began meeting together in each other's homes trying to embody that new way of being in the world. Friends started inviting friends to join their community, and they invited their friends, and they invited their friends, and the church of Jesus Christ went viral and grew from a dozen Palestinian Jews into a world wide movement that has transformed life

as we know it.

One of the strategic priorities we are proposing for our church to focus on during the next three years of our life together is to return to our roots and become a viral church again. It isn't a program that we can implement, it isn't an activity that we can organize, and it isn't a task we can undertake. It is an intangible experience that we have to pass on and it is one that our world is desperately longing for.

The community that gathers here in this place is unlike any other community in the world. Here everyone is cherished, not because of what we do or what we own or what we know or what we have to contribute but simply because we are all God's beloved sons and daughters. Here our highest concern is not to earn a profit or to meet production targets or improve efficiency, but to love one another. Here mercy and compassion and forgiveness and grace are valued above all other things.

Today more than ever before the world is yearning for a different way of life. People are longing for the kind of experience that we have found here in Christ's church. But they will only discover it if we pass it on. God's Holy Spirit has been poured out on us all. We have the power to become a viral church. When we have powerful and positive experiences here that are life giving, inspiring, uplifting or enriching, we need to share those experiences with our friends. We need to invite the people we know and care about to come and share the journey of faith with us.

When something goes viral, it has the potential to make a huge impact on the world. I raved about the tiramisu at Malia's to at least a hundred people in Battle Creek. Think about the impact we can make when we all start raving about the powerful and positive experiences we have here in Christ's church! Amen.

